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ABSTRACT

Although parents are often very busy with work and family responsibilities, there are many things they can do to help their school-age children learn and develop. This early childhood digest for parents provides tips obtained from parents of first and second graders in the School Transition Study on creative ways to stay involved in their children's learning and development. Suggestions are presented in four areas. First, parents can use their time well, such as organizing schedules, doing a few things at once, making daily routines a time for learning, and finding others to help. Second, parents can balance work schedules and family by doing some school things at the beginning of the day, making breakfast the big family meal, and doing things differently on the weekend. Third, parents can stay involved with their child's school by doing small things that fit into that school, using resources offered by the school, and asking the school for help. Fourth, parents can think about what's right for them and use available resources if they need help, such as a family resource center or parent education programs. (KB)

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National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education

Early Childhood Digest:

How Busy Parents Can Help Their Children Learn and Develop

September 1999

This Early Childhood Digest, produced by the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education, is based on information from the School Transition Study, sponsored by the MacArthur Network on Successful Pathways through Middle Childhood and conducted, in part, by the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP).

Parents can help their school-age children learn and develop, but parents are often very busy. They may be working two jobs or trying to find a job, going to school, or taking care of other family members.

No matter how busy parents are, there are things they can do to help their children. Parents of first- and second-graders in the "School Transition Study" research project have discovered creative ways to stay involved in their children's learning and development. Researchers conducting the survey learned important and useful tips to share with busy parents everywhere.

Use your time well

- *Organize your time.* One single parent of four who is going back to school tries hard to organize her class schedule so that she has time with her children. She is able to be home with them in the afternoons on most school days. In another family where the mother and father both work full time, they are able to organize their work schedules so that one of the parents is always at home with the children. One day a week after school, the children walk to their mother's workplace where they wait a short time with her until their father picks them up.

- *Do a few things at once.* One father arranges to do quiet household chores right beside his daughter who does her homework at the kitchen table. Then the father is there to answer questions. Another mother has her daughter start her homework in the family's car while they are waiting for her older brother to get out of school. The car is a quiet place where they can talk together.

- *Make daily routines a time for learning.* When one mother walks her girls to school, she uses the time to talk about the unsafe parts of the neighborhood and how the girls can protect themselves. Children are learning all the time, but when you talk to them like this, it can help even more with their learning.

- *Find other people to help.* One single parent who cannot be home in the afternoon or evening has the babysitter help the children with homework. Another single parent who works two jobs during the summer arranges for her son to get taken to his neighborhood summer program every morning by his grandfather, who lives nearby. When the program is over, the mother's friend takes the child to football practice and then back home, where the mother serves everyone a late dinner. As a busy parent, you can't do everything yourself. One important thing you can do is be the *manager*, and make arrangements for *other* people to help.

Balance work schedules and family

- *Do some school things at the beginning of the day.* One single father in our study who works a late shift uses the morning when he is home to check over homework with his son. Then he takes him to school. Sometimes he will sit in the classroom and watch or chat with the teacher before he goes to work.

- *Make breakfast the big family meal.* Another mother who also works late has her high school-aged daughter make a simple dinner for the younger children. Then the mother cooks a big hot breakfast every morning when she is home, before the children go to school.

- *Do things differently on the weekend.* One mother leaves for her job every morning before the children are up. But on Sundays, she wakes them up early, so she can share time with them before she goes to work. A special thing for this family is eating lunch later at the restaurant where the mother works.

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It can be very hard for parents working the evening or night shifts. One mother was able to do something about it. She was working a late shift and her son was angry and doing very poorly in school. She had a note from the school counselor, saying that her child was having problems in school, partly because she was not able to be with him in the afternoons and evenings. The mother showed this note to her boss and was able to get her work schedule changed, so she could be with her son. Now he is happier, and doing better in school.

Ways to stay involved with your child's school when you are busy

Being involved with school is an important way to show you care about your child's learning.

- *How busy parents stay involved at school.* One mother, who cannot volunteer in the classroom because of her work schedule, finds it easier to go to meetings at night, and has been to some school council meetings. Another mother volunteers to help keep things organized in the halls at the end of the school day, when she is there picking up her child. In a family where the mother is taking care of a baby, the father is able to help out in his older son's classroom 2 hours a week. Even with a baby, there may be things you can do at school: sell tickets for a show, answer phones in the office, or help put away books in the library when the baby is napping. If it's hard for you to be in the school building, you can work on some things at home, like decorations or displays for the classroom.

- *How schools help busy parents.* Some schools have afterschool child care or homework tutoring. Some schools provide transportation or child care to help parents come to school meetings at night. Schools in our study also made special arrangements to help. One school asked an older child to help a younger one from a different family with his homework because the younger one did not have anyone at home who could help. One school loaned a parent a video of a volunteer training meeting that the parent could not attend because of work.

- *Ways parents ask schools for help.* Staying in touch with your child's teacher is the most important thing you can do at school, but sometimes it can be hard to find a good time to talk. One mother called her son's teacher and asked for the parent-teacher conference to be changed to a better time for her. Another mother asked the teacher to call her at work, when the teacher needed to talk to the mother about her child. If it is hard for you to come to classroom open houses at night, ask if they also can be held in the mornings before school. Ask about potluck breakfasts to feed busy families before they go to work and school. Maybe you could come to meetings at night if the school helped. For example, ask if the school could open a study hall or offer homework help for older children during the meeting.

Think about what's right for you

Some parents feel so overwhelmed from everything they have to do that they can't seem to do anything. All parents should remember that there are places where they can get help when they need it. Family resource centers can help. Parent education programs can give parents new skills that will help them better use their time with their children. Parents may know another parent they can talk to and get ideas from.

Parents often feel guilty because they cannot spend as much time with their children as they would like. But it can help for parents to know that when they are busy, they can be setting an example for their children. Children watch their parents work hard at a job, attend classes, help out at church, or take care of relatives or friends. They can learn about responsibility and working for a goal from your example. Talking about this can help reinforce their learning.

Take time to think about your own situation. There may be things you are doing now that help you to be a part of your child's learning. Maybe there are changes you can make or ask others to make. Maybe some of the ideas from parents in our study can work for you, too.

This Digest was prepared by Ellen Mayer, Holly Kreider, and Peggy Vaughan of the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP). For more information on the work of the School Transition Study, a large national long-term research project looking at how family, school, and community shape children's development, please call HFRP at (617) 496–4304, write to them at 38 Concord Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138, or visit their Web site at ***http://hugse1.harvard.edu/~hfrp***

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